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AUTHOR Weaver, Constance
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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses some of the ways children develop functional phonics knowledge in the context of authentic reading and writing, as well as some of the ways teachers can foster such development. The digest suggests that children develop phonics knowledge by: having familiar stories or poems read to them repeatedly; discussing letter/sound relationships in the context of authentic reading selections; reading favorite stories, songs, and poems independently or with a peer; and developing their own strategies for learning letter/sound patterns. The digest discusses ways teachers can help children develop phonics knowledge: (1) have faith in children as learners; (2) discuss interesting patterns of onsets and rimes in the context of shared reading experiences; (3) emphasize the use of letter/sound cues along with prior knowledge and context; (4) foster the acquisition of phonics knowledge indirectly, through various means; (5) be alert for children's idiosyncratic ways of developing phonics knowledge; and (6) provide additional materials and help for individual children. (RS)

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Digest

Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication**EDO-CS-94-06**

Indiana University
2805 E. 10th St., Suite 150

D93

Bloomington, IN 47408-2698
(812) 855-5847; (800) 759-4723

Phonics in Whole Language Classrooms

by Constance Weaver

This digest discusses some of the ways children develop functional phonics knowledge in the context of authentic reading and writing, as well as some of the ways teachers can foster such development.

Children Develop Phonics Knowledge:

- "By having familiar and favorite stories or poems read to them again and again, during a shared reading experience wherein they can see the text and see the teacher point to words as they are spoken" (Holdaway, 1979). This process facilitates the learning of words and of letter/sound patterns, as well as an understanding of print and how it is read in English.
- "By discussing letter/sound relationships in the context of authentic reading selections." Teachers can facilitate such discussion within the shared reading experience, using big books or charts that all the children can see. Alphabet books also invite the discussion of letter/sound relationships.
- "By engaging in a limited number of activities reinforcing letter/sound relationships, as an outgrowth of the shared reading experience." For example, children might make charts of words exhibiting letter/sound patterns of particular interest to them. After two or more charts have been compiled, children could make related graphs comparing appropriate data (Whitin et al, 1990).
- "By learning to use letter/sound cues along with prior knowledge and context." For example, proficient readers seem unconsciously to use initial letters plus prior knowledge and context to predict what a word might be, before focusing on more of the word or the following context to confirm or correct. This strategy seems to come naturally for many children, but others may need instructional assistance in first using the strategy consciously.
- "By rereading favorite stories, songs, and poems, independently or with a peer." This independent practice contributes greatly to solidifying children's growing understanding of print. The rereading is facilitated if children have individual copies of the text, and if they can listen to a tape of the text as they read. It's especially helpful if the tape is appropriately paced (Carbo, 1989).
- "By observing and participating as the teacher demonstrates letter/sound relationships while writing." For example, the teacher may model his/her writing process, lead the children in guided writing, and/or write something from the children's dictation.
- "By writing independently, constructing their own spellings." Of course, primary grade children should be writing in whatever way they can, whether it be scribble writing, random letters and symbols, or letters that at least begin to be decipherable as words. But when they can use letters to represent sounds, they begin to promote their own phonics development through writing (Temple et al, 1993).
- "By developing their own strategies for learning letter/sound patterns." The story of "Jevon" (White, 1990) beautifully illustrates how children may develop their own strategies that teachers are not always aware of. During Jevon's second year in her kindergarten, White noticed that Jevon was learning letter/sound relationships by observing the spellings of his classmates' names, which were written on the message board and sign-up sheets, as well as on the papers they wrote. White reports that "Long before Jevon connected sounds and symbols in inventive spelling, names made their way into his written communication" (1990, 18-19).

Ways Teachers Can Help Children Develop Phonics Knowledge:

1. "First, have faith in children as learners." They can and usually will develop a grasp of letter/sound relationships with little direct instruction, just as they learned to talk without direct instruction in the rules of the English language. Also, don't assume that because children cannot do worksheets on particular phonics elements that they cannot read words with those same patterns (e.g. the example from Watson and Crowley, 1988, 263-265).
2. "Discuss interesting patterns of onsets and rimes, in the context of shared reading experiences." Among the

Constance Weaver is a Professor of English at Western Michigan University.

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stories, poems, rhymes, and songs chosen to share with children should be some that emphasize alliteration and rhyme. One of the best ways to generate children's interest in the sound elements of a selection may be to ask simply "What do you notice about this poem?" or, more specifically, "What do you notice about the sound in this poem?" (Mills et al, 1992). Though children may notice different sound elements than the teacher anticipated, this procedure gives children ownership over their own learning. Of course, much of the poetry that rhymes is humorous poetry—one thinks, for example, of Shel Silverstein's poetry or Jack Prelutsky's—though humorous poetry should comprise only a modest proportion of the poetry to which children are introduced. One book particularly rich in poems with alliteration, rhyme, and onomatopoeia is "Noisy Poems," collected by Jill Bennett (Oxford University Press, 1987). A cumulative book with wonderfully alliterative and onomatopoeic verbs is "Deep Down Underground," by Olivier Dunrea (Macmillan, 1989).

3. "As an outgrowth of the shared reading experience, engage children in, and/or allow for, a limited number of activities that reinforce their natural learning of letter/sound relationships and patterns." Mathematically-related ideas can involve making charts that list words with particular sound patterns, and graphs based upon the charts (for example, you might chart all the "al-" and "sp-" and "st-" words in several poems, then make a class graph showing the relative frequency of the words in each list (see Whitin et al, 1990). Children may especially enjoy collaborating in such activities—and in creating their own alphabet books, too. In "Looking Closely: Exploring the Role of Phonics in One Whole Language Classroom" (Mills et al, 1992), we see various phonics-enhancing activities that can stem from and enhance enjoyment of literature, as well as activities involving children's names.

4. "Emphasize the use of letter/sound cues along with prior knowledge and context." Teachers can do this (1) by modeling how they themselves use meaning (and grammar) along with initial letters to predict what a word might be; (2) by repeatedly encouraging children to think "what would make sense here" before trying to sound out a word, (3) by engaging together in oral cloze activities based on their shared readings ("What would fit in this sentence, 'I put o—— in the soup?'; and (4) by discussing, in literature discussion groups, how various children dealt with problem words. It is critical to help children develop and use letter/sound knowledge in the context of constructing meaning from texts.

5. "Foster the acquisition of phonics knowledge indirectly, through various means—"

—by pointing to words during shared reading experiences with big books, charts, etc.

- by providing small, multiple copies of many selections, so that children can easily reread favorite texts
 - by providing tapes of many selections for children to listen to, as they follow along with the written text
 - by attending to letter/sound patterns while modeling the writing process, engaging children in guided writing, and writing down what children have dictated
 - by encouraging children to write as best they can, and by helping them to develop phonemic awareness and phonics knowledge through invented spelling (see Freppon & Dahl, 1991)
 - by encouraging children to experiment with print and solidify their understanding of letter/sound patterns in a variety of self-chosen ways
6. "Be alert for children's idiosyncratic ways of developing phonics knowledge, and support those." Jevon's learning of letter/sound relationships through his classmates' names is but one example (White, 1990).
 7. "Provide additional materials and help for individual children, as appropriate." For instance, children who seem readily to grasp the concept of letter/sound relationships might especially benefit from Dr. Seuss books that reinforce letter/sound patterns—and other children would enjoy and benefit from such books too. Children who are exceptionally slow in grasping letter/sound relationships may benefit from tutorial assistance, such as that offered in Marie Clay's Reading Recovery Program.

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